

P. Foley, James
CIA 4.02 Ships (spy)
CIA USSR
CIA 4.01 Sosos

But NATO watches closely

Soviets deploy spy ships off U.S.

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The Soviet Union has deployed a fleet of spy ships off Canada to monitor NATO's military communications and probe its antisubmarine defenses.

Naval intelligence sources here and in other alliance headquarters say the ships sometimes are reinforced by Soviet Tupolev TU-95 (Bear) bombers converted into intelligence-gathering planes that fly between Cuba and the Murmansk area east of northern Norway.

Canada and the United States can do nothing about the planes and spy ships — sometimes they number more than 50 — because they are careful to remain in international waters.

But the alliance watches them closely with aircraft and warship patrols, using electronic and other means to find out what they are doing.

Vice-Adm. Douglas Boyle, head of the Canadian Navy and commander of NATO's Western Atlantic region, said the Soviet Union maintained up to 500 fishing trawlers off eastern Canada.

Two jobs to do

"We have established that between 10 and 15 percent of these trawlers are intelligence gatherers," he said in an interview. "They fish but they are out there doing another job," the admiral said.

The intelligence sources said the spy ships monitor radio conversations between alliance warships and aircraft and their headquarters ashore in Canada and the United States.

The ships are trying to find out NATO's military procedures, especially those that would be used in an East-West crisis, as well as changes in the alliance's strength through new weapons or tactics, the sources said.

Apart from eavesdropping on military radio links, the spy ships use sophisticated electronic equipment to discover technical information about ship and aircraft radar weapons systems, electronic warfare devices, and submarine-hunting sonar equipment.

"This mass of detail, when analyzed, pro-

vides a coherent picture of NATO naval and air capability and more importantly, changes and modifications in this capability," a senior source at a NATO headquarters in Europe said.

"From this picture the Soviet Union can plan the development lines for its Navy and air elements devoted to sea warfare," he added.

He and other sources said the alliance does the same with Soviet ships at sea and in waters near Russian naval and air bases, although this is not so necessary because the alliance can use ground-based installations in NATO countries near the Soviet Union.

The sources said the Soviet spy ships off Canada also investigate top-secret underwater listening posts that the United States has installed to warn of approaching Soviet submarines.

The United States has installed a complex system, called Sosos (for sound surveillance system), of highly secret underwater listening machines along the Atlantic and Pacific coasts of North America, as well as in other NATO areas.

The sources said knowledge of the workings of Sosos could allow the Soviets to develop means to baffle or incapacitate the system in a crisis.

Soviet subs watched

The United States and its NATO allies use the devices as well as other means to keep close tabs on Soviet submarines operating in the Atlantic.

The sources say several Soviet ballistic missile submarines usually are stationed off the Pacific Coast of North America.

"With that sort of company in the sea, we have to know exactly where they are all the time in case of a crisis," said a European NATO source.

The sources said the Soviet Union was not alone in sending its missile submarines near the coasts of a potential adversary. British and American missile submarines cruise near the coasts of the Soviet Union and its Warsaw Pact allies.

In addition to helping to track the ballistic missile submarines, the underseas devices are used to watch for the Soviet Union's large fleet of nonballistic submarines.

Warime assignments

In the event of a nonnuclear conventional war, the nonballistic submarines would pose the greatest threat to the 15-member Western alliance, for their task would be to sink American and Canadian ships trying to rush supplies and troop reinforcements to Europe.

"Europe would not survive to 30 days without cargo," said Admiral Boyle, who is retiring soon.

The necessity for Canada and the United States to get help quickly to the European allies in time of war is looked on by NATO as one of its greatest potential weaknesses.

Alliance defense planners expect a big naval and air battle would ensue in the Atlantic and that the NATO navies eventually would emerge victorious — but only after sustaining huge losses.

"The Russian intelligence gatherers off Canada simply are out to shorten the odds in their favor," said a defense analyst at NATO headquarters in Brussels.